

Two Aesthetics of Apocalypse

by Nina Mdivani

Recently as I was doing research on narrative structures I came across “The Imagination of Disaster,” 1965 essay by Susan Sontag, in which she eerily describes our collective traumatic state of mind as COVID-19 roams the world and reaps its victims. Thesis of Sontag’s essay is that science fiction films of 1960s succeeded with the general public as the most satisfying form of entertainment by portraying unimaginable horror through narrative of simplistic and mind-numbing banality.

Similarly, to what Sontag refers to as ‘aesthetics of disaster’ today we are touched on a deeper level as the impersonal, unthinkable danger paralyzes our lives and this multidimensional existential crisis is qualitatively different from what we have experienced before. Further contemplating Sontag’s thesis, I traced two broad directions in the aesthetics of apocalypse as it has often been presented in the Western art until now, while also trying to pin down what is qualitatively different today. The two outlined directions of course are schematic and represented only by a few defining examples. First of these aesthetical constructions is built upon passive understanding of our role in the larger cosmos, while second takes a more assertive, utilitarian, capability-based approach of working through threats to our existence through spiritual undertakings. The global crisis we are facing today addresses a different threat to the human society by physically separating us, the menacing effects of this particular apocalypse are directed toward attributes of the modern society, such as hypoconnectivity and value of the physical community. This is what is distinctive from the dark times faced before.

One long tradition of thinking through and representing existential crisis goes back to associating our ‘well-deserved’ evils with our sinful nature, disasters are brought to us by individual or collective moral destitution and hence not likely to be stopped by humans, our fate is not ours to decide. In the ancient Greece as well as in Rome human tragedies were largely perceived as decided by fancies and willfulness of gods. Humans were good-looking pawns with limited willpower. Advancement of Christianity changed all this, bringing stricter moral codes to the fore and giving men more agency and thus more evolved moral responsibilities. Men and women became morally accountable for their actions, an Arbiter, a Judge was put in higher place and anyone who decided to ignore His rules got punished. Evidently, eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 was partially blamed by some Romans as well as by nascent Christian community on liberalitarianism and the decadence of the Pompeian and Roman society.¹ Western civilization is built on guilt, shaming, it is built into our social structure as much as it is a default aspect of Christianity, a backbone of the whole civilization as we knew it at least up until now.

A consistent narrative has portrayed this moral accountability in the context of apocalypse and all its outcomes starting in 14th century with the so-called *dances of death*, *dance macabre*, *Totendanz*. Bubonic plague or “Black Death” ravaging Europe in

¹ Charles Waldstein, *Herculaneum: Past, Present, and the Future*, 1908.

1347-1353 and decimating from 30% to 60% of the continent's population,² brought with it a visual storyline that remained part of the European historical memory as well as of the universal language of the arts. Dancing skeleton symbolizing death first appears in 1424 in a form of a fresco in the Paris cemetery des Saints Innocents. In this fresco death is overtaking all people, not one class is exempt, kings and poppers, clergy and peasants, traders and dames all fall victims, a trend that continues. Usually the dance is shown as skeleton pulling with it a person in a distinctly recognizable attire, referencing his or her class. The image usually was accompanied by didactic poems teaching us that no matter who we are we still have the same end.

Through this allegorical portrayal the human frailty and transience has been explored, something that continues to be investigated by a majority of contemporary artists. However difficult it is to choose one artist and one work to illustrate this direction of thinking, but Alexandra Bricken (b.1967) in her 2016 multilevel installation titled *ESKALATION*, first presented at Hepworth Wakefield, a museum in West Yorkshire, England follows this macabre movement of figures. This work later presented in the Central Pavilion of 2019 Venice Biennale shows figures or rather their skins frozen in their simplistic movements, trying to ascend to the stairs that lead nowhere. In her own word Bricken shows "a dystopian view of what the end of humanity might look like."³

The second tradition of apocalyptic aesthetics is linked to a more empowering image of our human being who has parts of an animal and yet, an equal amount of intellectual and spiritual capacity. This view of vast human capacities links us to primordial, magical, shamanistic, intraspecies connection that empowers us to work with challenges, either when they are apocalyptic or not. A magician, Faustian figure⁴ is at the center at this sensibility and rituals of every sorts are the tools. Social orders come and go, but this powerful Renaissance wo(man) is there in our historical visual memory.

In contrast to the first type of apocalypse aesthetic outlined above, this second type might not have always been directly portrayed in the midst of the global crisis or the end of the world, but ritualistic, utilitarian attitudes are always noticeable. Rituals need privacy and hence they are always portrayed as though we came across them by chance. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1599 by Caravaggio (1571-1610) is an example a cold, concentrated brutalism of a ritual beheading of the biblical Syrian general.⁵ Although Judith's storyline is not directly associated with end of the world it is associated with planned destruction of her home city of Bethulia, a potential allegorical

² Encyclopedia Britannica, "Black Death."

³ Alexandra Bricken, 2019 Venice Biennale participants

⁴ Faust being in internal conflict with himself of course, pulled by Apollonian order and logic as well as Dionysian chaos and desires.

⁵ This painting later influenced Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653), daughter of Caravaggio's follower Orazio Lomi Gentileschi (1563-1639), who is now considered the only woman painter on par with Caravaggio, to create several intriguing paintings on the same topic, referencing her own rape by Agostino Tassi.

stand-in for Jerusalem.⁶ Caravaggio's own life was scarred by the epidemic of bubonic plague that killed his father and other close members of his family.⁷ The same theatrical brutalism and ritualistic capability essential to Caravaggio expressed through the cannon of Western as well as Eastern visual art, including Bosch, Breugel, Titian, various romantic interpretation of Faustian legend in 19th century and in a vast array of contemporary art.

Among the many excellent examples of portraying the reality where person is at the center of the universe and hence is (presumably) capable to work with the apocalyptic emergencies if they arise, I would cite only one. In *Balkan Baroque*, a video/installation/performance by Marina Abramović (b.1946), the artist diligently scrubs a surrounding pile of cowbones with a metal brush, soal and water. Abramović did this for six hours on four consecutive days on the background of installation addressing Serbian war as well as her own personal narrative in 1997, part 47th Venice Biennale. Artist's statement about this work outlined her vision of using personal ritual to transcend to universal, while washing your hands off blood is simply impossible.⁸ Yet, here there is also the aesthetic of apocalypse as seen through a more human-centered approach. Abramović as well as Caravaggio's Judith might or might not solve their or global problems, but they are capable of trying while giving us stunning visual clues for it.⁹

The deeply felt dread we are collectively experiencing today amidst COVID-19 is different from the aesthetics outlined above and is likely to produce yet another type of "aesthetics of disaster." Mistrust of those in power, inability to understand where and when exactly will this pandemic stop, whether it will disrupt all the bonds as we subscribed to solitary confinements are the main issues facing artists and thinkers today. It will take time to produce art of substance that would adequately address ongoing issues. However, there is one unique literarily prophecy I encountered by chance. In a bleak, but brilliant short story by a Russian writer Ludmilla Petrushevskaya (b.1938), titled "Hygiene," published in 1990 a similar pandemic disrupts an unnamed city, only a girl and a cat surviving from one multigenerational family. Girl is the one who gets first infected in her family and yet, she survives as she is the only one still bound by her humanness, through her loyalty to the cat when everything else, including human bonds, are disrupted. Petrushevskaya's visceral and minimalistic storytelling

⁶ Bethulia, The Catholic Encyclopedia (1907-1914).

⁷ Timothy Wilson-Smith, Caravaggio, Phaidon, 1998.

⁸ Janet A. Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović," Art Journal 58 (1999).

⁹ Another wonderful example of this aesthetic would be yet another presentation from Venice Biennale, namely Roberto Cuoghi's *Imitazione di Cristo*, 2017. Cuoghi's installation for "Il Mondo Magico" Italian Pavilion at Venice Biennale was curated by Cecilia Alemani, based on her curatorial reading of 1948 book by Ernesto de Martino. Her curatorial statement refers to de Martino's description of rituals as "devices through which individuals try to regain control in times of uncertainty and reassert their presence in the world."

underscores all our dreads. And yet, reminds us that attachments matter and while physical cleanliness might not save us, ethical and moral cleanliness will.

This short essay presents a simple response of a curator to what I perceive in the wider world, while this line of thought presents a fertile, intellectually fruitful and wide-ranging soil for further investigation.

April 2020

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